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THE LITERATURE OF ACTION.

BY EDMUND GOSSE.

AT the moment when I write these lines there is noticeable through the British Empire a very strange alertness of concentrated attention. Sir George Robertson tells us that when Chitral was being besieged, the garrison, in the midst of its patient labors, was suddenly transfixed in silence by a subterranean sound, the muffled, vibrating thud of a pick. The enemy were mining the gun-tower. Something of that sudden silence lies upon England as I write. It has dawned upon us that we may find it absolutely necessary to rebuff and chastise an intolerable intrusion upon our rights ; we hate the idea of war, but our very existence as a nation may require us to entertain it. That is the attitude, the feeling in the air ; everybody is listening to the sound of the pick axe. In this tension, home politics are forgotten. The nation has but a single thought, the possibility of the need of one great act of self-preservation. My own memories go back, faintly, so far as to the Crimean War ; never, in all those variegated years, have I seen anything approaching the attentive silence of to-day. The lion has straightened his front paws, and rises, and listens.

All may—and we are humane enough and sensible enough to hope that all will—pass by, and the lion sink again into his fur. But this attitude of undaunted expectancy is very remarkable, especially in a people little given to a display of the emotions. And the absolute unanimity of it is more than curious. In this solemn pose there are no parties, no dissensions ; the nation watches, gravely, with a single heart. It has struck me, in this taut moment of time, when a man can hardly plunge himself into the delectable waters of poetry and the fine shades, that it might

be interesting to note how literature is affected by this movement, or rather what is the relation of literature to this readiness for action. It is proper, in the first instance, to realize that the condition which has enabled Great Britain to thrill so suddenly with a defensive patriotism, is not entirely new. Our memories are so short that we take each surprise for something unprecedented. I borrowed, therefore, at the opening of this article, my little illustration from the siege of Chitral, because, although a new, a more critical, danger has abruptly attracted our attention now, for years past we have been in the position of a beleaguered town, which no one has quite liked to be the first to attack.

Without intruding an inch further into politics, but keeping to our own province of literature, it appears to me to be of interest to note that this besieged attitude of Great Britain among the European nations, which has almost insensibly become accentuated, has been accompanied by a certain literary movement. If we look back to the years before the first Egyptian campaign, we shall be surprised to see how pacific our tastes were, how little encouragement was given to the literature of action. There was a distinct dislike, early in the eighties, to any narrative which exalted the boisterous part of man. Fiction, poetry and drama were expected to be idyllic or reflective. Even history, amusingly enough, had its romantic coloring washed off it, and its exciting incidents reduced. It was said that if young people studied history they should concentrate their attention, not on battles, but on the Constitution; and Dr. Stubbs supplied the learned want.

The revival of active romance may be roughly dated from the publication of Stevenson's "Treasure Island," a book which it was my privilege to watch through all its stages of creation. "Treasure Island" was so completely foreign to the spirit of the time, that it was only a very third-rate boys' newspaper that would consent to publish it at all, and it is a curious circumstance (of which I could give documentary proof) that it was found too romantic a tale of action for the boy subscribers to this silly print. If the editor could have broken off his contract, the end of "Treasure Island" would never have appeared. It was reprinted as a volume, with the overwhelming vogue which all the world is aware of; for a new taste was germinating in the public, and this graceful story of adventure was exactly the thing to foster it.

In "Treasure Island" the British public became habituated to

violent death and breathless incident in a romance ; but it was in "King Solomon's Mines" that these condiments first began to be used with a free hand. Mr. Rider Haggard had been writing for two or three years when, in 1886, he suddenly took the public by storm. In the very ingenious story I have just mentioned, English readers were given a rougher and fierier liquor than had been offered to them since the Crimean War, and Stevenson's romances, which became more serious and more adult than "Treasure Island," never equalled those of Mr. Rider Haggard in blood-thirstiness. The latter writer discovered that he supplied a demand which he seemed to have created; in some of his later African romances, which are little more than colonial butcheries, he distinctly oversupplied it. "Nada, The Lily," with its innocent name, is unquestionably the bloodiest book in the world. This was extravagant, and Mr. Rider Haggard's vogue for this class of romance declined. It is improbable that this very clever novelist—whose powers of invention are most unfairly depreciated at the present moment—will ever return to that sort of work. But his influence in awakening a taste for violent and sanguinary action is not to be underestimated.

Then came a period of materialistic awakening. Everywhere in the Empire the natural elements—the barbarian elements, if we will—found expression. Our incessant "little wars" were followed with a sympathy which had constantly been denied to them in the Middle Victorian period ; and each little war increased our appetite for another. At the same time there began, and flowed over the country like a wave, an unexampled enthusiasm for every kind of athletics. A fresh interest in the navy was awakened, and as the peace party subsided and disappeared throughout the country, greater and greater sacrifices were cheerfully made for the support of our ships. If nowadays we read Matthew Arnold's old diatribes against our upper classes, we may smile; there is no question now of upper, middle or lower, for the Barbarian holds the field undisturbed. We have become, in a dozen years, a nation but faintly interested in any subject which does not bear upon the training and development of the muscles, individual or politic. England has gone to school under a colossal Sandow and has no time, for the moment, to think of anything else.

However much the philosopher and the dreamer may regret the necessity of this strange obsession in physical strength—and

the present writer, himself a useless dreamer, sighs beneath it—no one with a grain of sense can doubt that circumstances point to its being an unavoidable preparation for a crisis in national history by no means far ahead. That being the position, it seems obvious that all that can in any wise direction be done, is to try with all the feeble force at our disposition to point readers—who insist, by a healthy instinct, on the literature of action—to books of adventure that encourage the best sides of the Anglo-Saxon temperament. In the feverish demand for entertaining narratives of the adventurous class, two distinct tendencies may be seen. One is towards the entirely monstrous and fantastic, in which real life and the genuine spirit of man are subordinated to a mere dram-drinking of foolish horrors. This autumn, we have seen in London the most preposterous example of this ever foisted on a gaping public, the fabulous exploits of a Swiss courier, masquerading as a man of science, and taking thousands of foolish readers captive with tales of wombats soaring in the sunset sky, and faithful colored wives who eat their children that they may nurse their husbands with a more devoted freedom. It is plain that the craving for monstrosities of this sort, and the easy credulity which will swallow such traveller's tales, are unwholesome symptoms of the public love of the literature of action.

Fortunately, there is a reverse to the medal. We have had the signal good fortune to see, at this opportune hour, the development of perhaps the most purely patriotic talent that ever flourished in England. The most powerful and distinguished British author, under thirty-five years of age, is unquestionably Mr. Rudyard Kipling, and his whole literary career is one unflagging appeal to the fighting instincts of the race. We see nothing in the general trend of his genius, if we do not see that it makes directly for the preparedness of the English people in an eventual crisis. Mr. Kipling is not correctly styled a Jingo or a Chauvinist. He does not provoke war, or underestimate its afflictions, but he preaches forever in our ears "Be ready!" He marshals us by land and sea, he brings outlying kinsfolk up into line with us, he questions us incessantly as to the state of our sinews and of our guns. The influence of this one young civilian, without external prestige of any kind to help him, has been simply prodigious. His breath has stirred the veins, not of hundreds of men, nor of thousands, but of a cluster of nations.

The peculiar gravity of Mr. Kipling's appeal to the English speaking races—for even America is surely not unaffected by his voice—has been met in Great Britain by the inevitable chorus of imitators. Every song writer, every leader writer, every story teller has a little touch of his magic to-day, a little strain of what the Germans might call *Kiplingismus*. His appearance in our literature at this crisis, with its sweeping away of the graceful, but slightly effeminate, cult of beauty and harmony which preceded it, is one of those extraordinary coincidences which occur in the history of the mind. For who shall say whether athleticism created Mr. Kipling, or whether Mr. Kipling has encouraged athleticism? The two grow side by side, and to what harvest who can tell?

We have said that with the growth of a wholesome literary patriotism an unhealthy love of horrors for their own sakes has grown up among us. But happily the antidote grows side by side with the poison; and the very month which disposed of M. Grien has seen the publication of one of the sanest and the most invigorating books of adventure which the English language contains. It is not by a mere accident that Sir George Robertson's "Chitral; The Story of a Minor Siege," appears at the very moment when the national tension is at its highest. We find that Englishmen are face to face with a problem of the greatest delicacy and gravity. Is it not natural that we should look about us to see how Englishmen may be expected to behave at crises of the most violent kind? Is it not salutary that we should ask how the young men trained upon football and cricket, who have tried to shoot and climb and ride, can use their physical fitness when they are called to act in the face of destiny? With a peculiar poignancy, therefore, as a man watching the starry heavens reflected in a little pool, we look to a narrative like that of Sir George Robertson to discover what qualities we may expect to see widely developed in facing a solemn national decision.

Four years ago very few people in England or America knew where Chitral was. It is a little fortified town planted on a steep river bank in the centre of Asia. The vast snow peaks of the Hindu-Kush divide it, like a rampart, from the most mysterious country in the world, Kafiristan. Round this fort, in its grim, cold isolation, lies the principality of Chitral, with an area about equal to that of Wales. Cabul is so near to it on the west that it has been naturally to the terrible Amir of Afghanistan, and not to the

vague and distant government of India, that its hill tribes looked. If you examine a map of six or seven years ago, you find Chitral in a white no-man's land, far to north and west of the red frontier of British supremacy. It was ruled in those days by a family of treacherous princes, each of whom successively waded to the throne through the blood of his uncles and his brothers.

The Government of India, in its infinite wisdom, determined that the moment had come to interfere with the little tyrants who stabbed and squabbled among the picturesque population above the glacier-fed torrents of Chitral. In January, 1893, it sent Dr. (now Sir) George Robertson on a mission thither from his residency in Gilgit. It was a highly adventurous expedition, for the tribes were violently prejudiced against Europeans, and their unbridled treachery was a notorious matter. He took with him three English officers and a little escort of 50 Sikh soldiers. They arrived at Chitral to find the hereditary prince, or Mehtar, palpitating with fear, not of the English, but of his own family. Presently, after the English mission had left Chitral about a year, this Mehtar had the usual accident out hunting; he was shot dead in the back by his own half brother. This sinister news reached Gilgit on January 6, 1895.

The Chitralis had by this time come to recognize the might of the Government of India, and they were very anxious to have their new ruler's little escapade commuted. But the position was a very serious one, and extremely difficult to understand at a distance. Dr. Robertson, therefore, was ordered once more to go over to Chitral, and examine its perilous politics on the spot. The journey, made in conditions of Arctic cold through some of the roughest country in the world, was not at first embarrassed by any unfriendliness of the natives; but Dr. Robertson was presently galvanized by news that Umra Khan, a very formidable mountain character, had proclaimed a holy war, was marching into Chitral territory with from 3,000 to 4,000 men, and had called upon the new Mehtar to join him. Moreover, a dangerous pretendant, Sher Afzul, this Mehtar's uncle, was also moving upon Chitral with unknown designs. Dr. Robertson received, meanwhile, orders from India to hold Chitral and drive Umra Khan out of its territories.

Here, in a moment, full and almost imperial responsibility fell upon Dr. Robertson. The first thing he did was to depose the Mehtar who had murdered his predecessor, and who was hated in

Chitral, and to recognize as prince a still younger brother, Shuja-ul-Mulk, a nice little boy, henceforth familiarly known as "Sugar-and-Milk." This act was decided upon during the race for the fort, which ended on the 31st of January, 1895, by Robertson and his soldiers dashing into Chitral ahead of all their competitors. For a month they held the enemy at large, waiting for reinforcements which never came, but contriving to keep up communication with India. On the 1st of March the last letter from Chitral was passed along the river to Mastuj, and then Robertson and his gallant company, a mere speck in that huge wilderness of rocks and snows, faded out of sight for fifty days, while the eyes of all England hung, distracted with anxiety, on the shrouded glens of the Hindu-Kush.

This is the necessary prelude to Sir George Robertson's story, which I am not proposing to re-tell tamely here. I am addressing American readers, who, of course, take a very limited interest in our "little wars." With a whole new system of savage archipelagoes of their own, the American nation will soon find themselves provided with quite as many little wars as they need for their private entertainment. But Sir George Robertson's book does not address Englishmen alone. It is a very attractive piece of literature, excellently composed, excellently narrated, with touches of beauty here and there which we might expect a soldier to disdain. It is as a specimen of our new literature of action, to which we may be proud to point our friendliest neighbors, that I am here recommending Sir George Robertson's book. Read "Chitral; The Story of a Minor Siege," I say to those who, being not of us, are yet indulgent to us, for you will never see the virtues of our nation reflected in a more agreeable mirror.

In the first place, to praise a man's modesty is to affront that very merit in him, and yet it is impossible to touch this book, and to escape from the sense of the author's self-abnegation. He has words of praise, congratulation, gratitude, for everybody, for the officers who fought with him, for those who struggled to reach him in vain, for those who, after (it must be said) an unconscionable delay, managed to relieve him at last. All their deeds are glorified, all their names made prominent; but, of himself, scarcely a word. If this were all the history we possessed and if we could not read between the lines, we should think that Robertson played a very third-rate part in this spirited drama. But Lord Roberts knows,

and the Government of India knows, and all who fought beside him and for him know, that Sir George Robertson was the central force of the whole incident, that it was his gallantry and diplomacy and resource that pulled us safely out of that very tight place.

The man of ability who is not eaten up with self-complacency has eyes to observe his surroundings. While the little English garrison were shut up in Chitral, with the murderous hill tribes humming outside, their spirits rose and fell. It was part of the commander's task to watch these fluctuations and to guard against them. Of each of the young officers who were with him, he has a genial portrait. Here is a sketch of one of them:

"He was a melodious person of gregarious instincts. Looking back, one reflects how churlishly his songs and shuffling accompaniments were sometimes received, and how badly we should have missed them. I think that Harley, even after an all-night's watch, always lay down to sleep with reluctance, and would never have rested at all had there been anyone equally companionable to talk to. His unquenchable good spirits stimulated us greatly without our knowing it."

How characteristic this is! and not less so the little touches about dogs which come here and there. "On the Gilgit frontier a subaltern's equipment can hardly be considered complete without a banjo and a fox terrier." The banjo Mr. Kipling has celebrated in one of the most thrilling of his lyrics; the fox terrier figures in every frontier battle. The wounding of "Edwardes' nice little dog" is most gravely recorded among the incidents of the defence of Reshun. It is connected with the tender sentiment about home, and all things home-like, which the smart young soldiers carry with them in every contingency. I must quote from Sir George Robertson again a passage of rare beauty; the moment described is that at which their hopes seemed at their lowest, and nothing seemed before the little English garrison but cruel and humiliating death. The Commander stood on the ramparts, and he looked out over the closely beleaguering forces of the enemy:

"Any attempt on us would have been out of the question on this date, so light was the sky with its young crescent moon. To the north, that wonderful mass of snow mountain looked as lovely and as unsympathetic as ever. Its beauty always made me melancholy, nor could it be looked upon without a long sigh and sad thoughts of those far away at home, who were, we knew, suffering much more for us than we suffered ourselves. We could only repay their anxious thoughts with others as tender. If we could but have sent them a single line of love, a weight would have been lifted from our hearts."

The siege of Chitral was a return to a primitive condition of

things. The methods of the besiegers and of the besieged were mediæval, and the old value of individual bravery, each man in some degree cast upon his own resources, was strangely revived. It might have been reasonably supposed that this would prove a great disadvantage to English officers, trained to depend on all the mechanical aids of our elaborate civilization. It was a disadvantage, of course ; it added to the difficulties, but they humorously accepted and surmounted it. The essential interest of this book, apart, of course, from its merits as a narrative superlatively told, lies in the evidence it supplies of the rapidity with which the well-bred and disciplined young Anglo-Saxon accepts responsibility and turns it to good account. Mr. Rudyard Kipling has a story of the veteran writer who meets in London a group of polite, well-groomed, modest youths, who turn out to have been actually doing, in the wild places of the world, the work that he has been dreaming about. It is impossible to read Sir George Robertson's "Chitral" and not see that these are those very youths in action. These British officers of his, with their irresistible pluck and energy merely dormant, ready to break out into a blaze at a moment's notice, are what Mr. Kipling gazes at fondly, and murmurs "Mine own people !"

If this is the temper and these the abilities which our recent national predilection for the literature of action fosters, we need hardly regret that "bower of roses in Bendameer's stream" in which the Middle Victorian poets lay at full length, discussing the subtleties of the passion of love. If it were going to last forever, if there were to be no reaction from this materialism, I should deeply deplore it. A man should not, and a nation should not, spend its whole life with a musket in its hand, behind a barricade. But there are times and seasons in the life of a nation, as in the life of a man, when self-respect and all the dearest emotions of the heart compel the strictest attention to practical defence. The American people, with whose thoughts and instincts we are more closely in sympathy than with those of any other race, have lately proved this necessity. They have passed through a crisis which many of their most contemplative spirits regretted, but which was inevitable. Their honor, their place in civilization, called imperiously upon them for an action which they deplored, but which they did not dream of evading.

We, too, in England to-day hear something very like the same

call, but pronounced with even intenser gravity. All I have attempted to do here is to sketch very roughly the history and character of the literature which has prepared us to receive the order with serenity and firmness. We, in our beleaguered island, hear, or believe we hear, the muffled sound of the pick-axe mining our prosperity and our rights. An hysterical excitement would be out of place, and there is no sign among us of its being felt. We believe, humbly, gravely, that we are ready. And there is evidence in our literature of the last twelve years to show that we have been preparing ourselves for a great international struggle by the games we have loved best to play, the stories which have entertained us most, and the narratives of historical adventures which we have been most eager to read.

EDMUND GOSSE.